

From Colombo to Copenhagen - A Road Map

The Path: Lead from the Front

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The United Nations Climate Catastrophe summit will be held next month in Copenhagen. Climate catastrophe means different things to different people. For the people living in the developed world "it is a matter of concern however solutions that cannot be implemented by myself in my back yard can be implemented by others in other areas". For the Southern policy makers and leaders it is only a trap to stop the development of the South. For NGOs in the south it is yet another funding opportunity. For academics it is a research opportunity. For professionals and consultants it is a new income stream. For the general public living in the South it is a subject which is not familiar to them. Unfortunately only a few show genuine concern – concern driven by a need to formulate a workable global solution regardless of the posturing and gesturing of that dubious set of entities known as “concerned parties”.

The path to a low carbon economy is obstructed mainly by the tug of war between the developed North and developing South. We all know that the per capita carbon emission level of northern countries is much higher than in the South. Historically the North has emitted enormous volumes of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. In other words the North is indebted to the South and currently carries a huge ecological debt. The South quite rightly claims that the North has to stop emitting CO₂ immediately. They insist that the North should reduce their emission levels at least by 40% by 2020 against the 1990 emission levels. Further, based on the IPCC recommendations, the South insists that per capita emission levels should be reduced at least by 80% by 2050.

The North on the other hand highlights that the population density in the South is very high and therefore there is no way for the south to increase the per capita emission level without damaging earth. Further, the North claims that it is ready to reduce the emission level only if the South agrees to limit the carbon emissions increase. The oil and coal companies in all countries are influencing governments to avoid reaching a compromise. The industrialists in the North are influencing the northern states not to commit to binding emission reduction targets citing that they will not be able to complete with Southern counterparts that are not bound by emission reduction targets. On the other hand SAME oil and coal companies push the southern governments to fight for their carbon emission rights. As a result, the negotiations have reached a deadlock with neither party ready to compromise.

Technology Transfer

A topic discussed at the climate catastrophe negotiations is Technology Transfer. The South is demanding that the North establishes mechanisms for technology transfer which can be defined as the process of transferring technology from countries, firms, institutions and communities that possess mitigation and adaptation technologies to their counterparts that do not, in such a way that the receiver can adapt, develop and use the technology under local conditions.

The four main categories of barriers to technology transfer from the North to the South are: lack of information, lack of funding, lack of local capacity and Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs). IPR is at the centre of the technology transfer debate. While developed countries argue in favour of IPR and consider IPR to encourage technology transfer, developing countries consider IPR as a barrier to technology

transfer. Of the IP tools, those most relevant to technology and technology transfer are copyrights, patents, industrial designs, trade secrets and integrated circuits while copyrights and patents are considered to be the most influential.

The proposal of the developing world is to leave out all environmentally sound technologies for mitigation and adaptation from the patent and copyright regime and to relax Intellectual Property Rights on such technologies. They further request the establishment of a technology transfer mechanism under UNFCCC and a reaffirmation of World Trade organizations (WTO) rules to avoid carbon protectionism. The claim of the South is of utmost importance as this is not the time to satisfy the greed of the industrialist but an emergency situation where the earth is facing a catastrophe. The whole world: both North and South need to get together and work collectively to overcome this crisis. Technology should be transferred at the fastest rate possible to the developing world to tap renewable energy potential as fast as possible; if not, the whole world would be in trouble.

Carbon markets and carbon sinks – faulty thinking and futile action

The carbon market is a compromise reached at Kyoto after the Climate Change negotiations held in 1997. Accordingly, the developed world can achieve legally binding emission reduction targets not by reducing their own emissions but by purchasing Certificates of Emissions Reductions (CERs) from the developing world. This was originally put forward by the North to continue its carbon emissions. This carrot, offered by the North, was gleefully accepted by the South as their only concern was to grab some money from the developed world. The countries in the South now fight with each other to get the limited number of such carrots offered to them. It should be noted that the carbon market had some value when the world was discussing a 5% reduction. However, we are now at the point where we are talking of an 80-100% reduction. In the present context carbon trading has no future since every nation will have to start dramatically reducing its own carbon emissions. Thus, there is no need to waste time on such insignificant matters at this stage.

The developing world is keen on getting some money for carbon sinks as well. Though it is clear that it is not possible to resolve the issue of climate catastrophe by increasing the bio carbon reserve to capture and store the fossil carbon emitted, the South is fighting to get qualified for carbon sinks purely to get some money from the developed world. Further, the South is keen on Reduced Emissions from Degradation and Deforestation (REDD) as well since they may get some financial support for stopping degradation and deforestation. This is an insane argument. The developing world needs to stop degradation and deforestation not because financing is available from the North or to prevent stop climate change but rather, for their own survival and multiple collateral benefits.

These negotiations are rapidly deviating from the original goal of limiting the global temperature rise to 2 degrees Centigrade. The 'right to pollute slogan' of the south has now become an outdated theory as the North has already finished the carbon emitting quota of the South. Threatening to build and building fossil fuel infrastructure in the South during the coming decade is useless as well. The fossil fuel infrastructure built in the North is a burden for them now and the push is for low carbon technologies. The only advantage the north has is that they have already exploited fossil fuels to the hilt. On the contrary any fossil fuel infrastructure built at present in the South will have to be abandoned soon and thus, the money pumped into it will be of no use. The only path for the developing world at this juncture is building renewable energy and energy efficient infrastructure as quickly as possible.

Adaptation

Adaptation is another important issue raised by the South. What would happen to the world if global temperatures increase by 2 degrees Centigrade? 125,000 years ago, when temperatures were last between 1 and 2 degrees higher than they are now, sea levels were five or six metres higher too. *Mark Lynas* the author of 'Our Future on a Hotter Planet' says that the entire Indian subcontinent will be fighting for survival. As the glaciers disappear from all but the highest peaks, their runoff will cease to power the massive rivers that deliver vital freshwater to hundreds of millions. Water shortages and famine will be the result, destabilising the entire region. Not only coastal communities will suffer. As mountains lose their glaciers, people will lose their water supplies. Everywhere, ecosystems will unravel as species either migrate or fall out of synch with each other.

By the time global temperatures reach two degrees of warming in 2050, more than a third of all living species will face extinction. Even in average years, people will die of heat stress. Saharan heat-waves will sweep across the Mediterranean. Greenland will tip into irreversible melt once global temperatures rise past a mere 1.2 degrees Centigrade. The ensuing sea-level rise will be far more than the half-metre that the IPCC has predicted for the end of the century. Central London would be flooded. Bangkok, Bombay and Shanghai would lose most of their area. In all, half of humanity would have to move to higher ground.

Even at a less than 2 degrees Centigrade temperature increase, the Arctic sea icecap disappears, leaving polar bears homeless and changing the Earth's energy balance dramatically as reflective ice is replaced during summer months by darker sea surface. It is now expected by 2030 or even earlier. Tropical coral reefs suffer severe and repeated bleaching episodes due to hotter ocean waters, killing off most coral and delivering a hammer blow to marine biodiversity. Droughts spread through the sub-tropics accompanied by heat waves and intense wildfires. Worst-hit are the Mediterranean, the south-west United States, southern Africa and Australia.

This implies that even if we manage to limit the temperature increase to 2 degrees Centigrade still a larger sector of the society need to adapt to the new climatic conditions. Adaptation is a real issue however the climate catastrophe related negotiations should be centred on mitigation measures to ensure that we are within 2 degrees Centigrade.

The current slogan of the South is environmental justice and equity. Therefore, issues of funds for mitigation and adaptation activities in the developing world are important topics that they brought to the negotiation table. The South is keen on getting a significant financial commitment from the developed world while the North is negotiating to lower it as much as possible. The South should realize that donations and grants are not needed from the North. What is really needed is that the North repays its ecological debt to the South. The best way to handle this issue is to set-off the ecological debt of the north against the financial debt of the developing world. It is just simple paperwork.

Even if a deal is sealed for emissions reductions, the adaptation to the 2 degrees Centigrade conditions by the masses will be a challenge. Hence it is necessary to take measures for adaptation. The South if it is in a position to strikes deal for trade-off of ecological debt with financial debt and it should use the advantage of the deal for the benefit of the vulnerable communities and provide financial assistance for adaptation.

Environmental justice

If the South is keen on genuinely addressing environmental justice and equity related issues then instead of engaging in the tug of war with the North it should prove its earnestness by example and narrow the gap within the South. The rich living in the South is the opinion maker in the South. They should give-up their high carbon lifestyles first before asking the North to give up their high carbon lifestyles. Equity is not the real issue in the climate catastrophe challenge with respect to its outcomes since our mother earth cannot distinguish Northern carbon emissions from Southern carbon emissions. If we are serious about the gravity of the situation then we should realize that there is no time left for us to continue with the 20 year long North-South tug of war any further. This is not a matter of equity but rather, a matter of the very survival of the human race. If humankind can find a path to a low carbon economy then our historical responsibility will diminish. It is clear that it is not fair; however as human beings we have to live with it.

A deal at Copenhagen is essential to reduce the emission levels of the North by 40% in 2020 against their 1990 levels. It will not be a bad deal even if the South agrees to limit the increase in their own carbon emissions. The reason is this: even if the North reduces its emissions by 100% still the South cannot continue to increase emission levels if the global temperature rise is to be limited to 2 degrees Centigrade. Right to pollute is no more a possibility. This is by no means a defeat for the South but a win for human civilization.

Clearly, it is not the North that is best positioned to find a low carbon path but the South as the South has less of a burden on maintaining fossil fuel infrastructure. Hence why should the South invite the North to be the leader in the post fossil fuel era as well? The South should not engage in such unnecessary sacrifices and it should try to take the lead role. Our younger brother, the Maldives has already declared that it is planning to reach carbon neutral status by 2020. Despite this laudable goal, they have no other solution, their impact is insignificant and implicitly, their voice is not that powerful.

The South can support them by joining this campaign. As a step towards forming such a network the Maldives hosted the first Climate Vulnerable Forum on 9th Nov. This is a gathering of the countries' most vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change. The Forum called for a redoubling of efforts as the countries were gravely concerned at reports of a downgrading of expectations for Copenhagen summit. They called upon all other countries to follow the moral leadership shown by the Republic of Maldives by voluntarily committing to achieving carbon-neutrality. Despite recognizing that they cannot achieve this goal on their own, they expressed their determination, as vulnerable States, to demonstrate leadership on climate change by leading the world into the low-carbon and ultimately carbon-neutral economy.

Unlike the developed world Sri Lanka is well within the reach of a low carbon economy and ideally placed to lead the world into the post fossil fuel era. A country having a Buddhist heritage which promotes morale values and frugality will be ideally placed to lead the way. It is necessary for Sri Lanka to first announce that it will reach the carbon neutral status by 2020. As the chair of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Sri Lanka can invite other SAARC countries to join the campaign. Can we imagine what will happen to the climate change negotiations if South Asia declares such an emission reduction target? The North will be short of excuses for further delays in taking firm decisions. All the necessary and sufficient conditions except one are there in Sri Lanka for facing the challenge of climate catastrophe. What is missing is nothing else but the will.